

A Property Rights Ombudsman

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The General Assembly convenes today in special session to consider legislation to fix a number of the flaws in our campaign finance and contracting system that led to the downfall of the Rowland administration. I urge the leadership to also consider a reform that would restore the faith of residents who believe that eminent domain may be used to take homes to enrich developers unjustly.

A vocal minority, led by such organizations as the Washington-based Institute of Justice, has spread misinformation and distortions about the eminent domain issue. Their political goal is to eliminate the use of eminent domain for any reason and remove local government altogether from the economic development arena.

In Connecticut, one of the most densely populated states in the country, eminent domain is a powerful economic development tool that encourages public/private partnerships, creates jobs and stabilizes neighborhoods. The \$100 million Learning Corridor and the \$1 billion Adriaen's Landing are just two examples of projects that would never have been built if the city and state lacked the power of eminent domain.

Those who argue for the elimination of eminent domain would put Connecticut at a significant disadvantage as it reinvests in its communities and tries to create enough jobs to significantly reduce an unemployment rate that is exceeding the national average for the first time in eight years.

I am proposing that the General Assembly create the position of property rights ombudsman. That official would act as a (free) resource to people whose property is subject to eminent domain takeover by the state or any municipality.

The ombudsman would have the ability to mediate between the government and the property owner and in appropriate cases compel arbitration. This independent third party would ensure that property owners are provided their full and fair due process under the law. The ombudsman would see to it that governments exercising eminent domain justly compensate property owners and use eminent domain exclusively for the public good.

Utah has a property rights ombudsman. That official has helped thousands of property owners with their questions regarding eminent domain and has played an important part in resolving conflicts. Having a neutral party well-versed in the law of eminent domain to counsel property owners, municipalities and civic organizations significantly enhances the public's confidence that eminent domain is truly a last resort.

The prudent use of eminent domain by local governments has allowed towns to build new housing and schools, create jobs and strengthen neighborhoods. A hasty rush to limit a power that has done so much to build up our state would be a blow to jobs in Connecticut.

Eddie A. Perez is mayor of Hartford.

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